Institutional repositories: it’s a matter of sticks and carrots

In May 2007, the University of Liège, where I was rector, passed a regulation that the full text of all articles published by its researchers since 2002 must be deposited in its open-access institutional repository, nicknamed ORBi for Open Repository of Bibliography. For publications under a publisher’s embargo, only metadata would be accessible, with full text available from authors on request. Deposting books, book chapters, and other types of publications as well as articles published before 2002 was recommended.

Many other universities have repositories, along with mandates that their researchers use them. They are the bedrock of green open access, where articles in subscription publications are made freely accessible elsewhere.

For institutions, repositories are a vital tool for keeping track of their researchers’ output. For researchers and the public, they offer rapid and universal access to knowledge generated with public funds. Last but not least, they help authors reach a vastly wider readership.

Compliance rates, however, are typically only 5 to 30 per cent. A partly filled repository is partly useless. They succeed only if they contain all an institution’s outputs, with searchable full text. ORBi now contains 90 per cent of the papers produced by Liège’s researchers.

Liège owes this exceptional level of compliance—far and away the highest of any institutional repository—in large part to a policy of only allowing publications from ORBi for consideration in internal assessment procedures, such as promotions, grant proposals and applications for human resources. As the Belgian university system is decentralised, with much of the power residing in institutions, this is a significant incentive.

As well as the link to assessment procedures (the stick) ORBi’s success stems from researchers’ increasing awareness of the advantages of green open access (the carrots). The repository provides authors with user-friendly tools showing many statistics and classical or alternative metrics, including downloads and citations. It can supply a beautifully typeset and ordered list of publications under an embargo, only metadata would be available, with full text available from authors on request. Depositing books, book chapters, and other types of publications as well as articles published before 2002 was recommended.

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